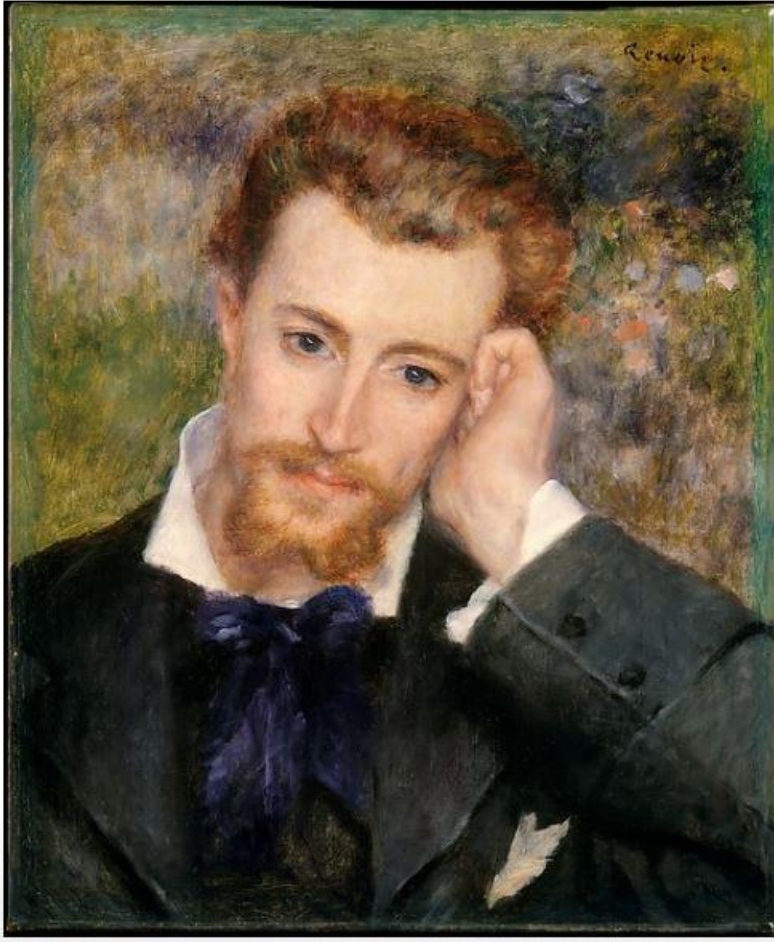


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The pride of men issue. Edited by Matt Pierard.

THE STORY OF IT

The Project Gutenberg Etext of *Some Short Stories* by Henry James

CHAPTER I

The weather had turned so much worse that the rest of the day was certainly lost. The wind had risen and the storm gathered force; they gave from time to time a thump at the firm windows and dashed even against those protected by the verandah their vicious splotches of rain. Beyond the lawn, beyond the cliff, the great wet brush of the sky dipped deep into the sea. But the lawn, already vivid with the touch of May, showed a violence of watered green; the budding shrubs and trees repeated the note as they tossed their thick masses, and the cold troubled light, filling the pretty saloon, marked the spring afternoon as sufficiently young. The two ladies seated there in silence could pursue without difficulty--as well as, clearly, without interruption--their respective tasks; a confidence expressed, when the noise of the wind allowed it to be heard, by the sharp scratch of Mrs. Dyott's pen at the table where she was busy with letters.

Her visitor, settled on a small sofa that, with a palm-tree, a screen, a stool, a stand, a bowl of flowers and three photographs in silver frames, had been arranged near the light wood-fire as a choice "corner"--Maud Blessingbourne, her guest, turned audibly, though at intervals neither brief nor regular, the leaves of a book covered in lemon-coloured paper and not yet despoiled of a certain fresh crispness. This effect of the volume, for the eye, would have made it, as presumably the newest French novel--and evidently, from the attitude of the reader, "good"--consort happily with the special tone of the room, a consistent air of selection and suppression, one of the finer aesthetic evolutions. If Mrs. Dyott was fond of ancient French furniture and distinctly difficult about it, her inmates could be fond--with whatever critical cocks of charming dark-braided heads over slender sloping shoulders--of modern French authors. Nothing had passed for half an hour--nothing at least, to be exact, but that each of the companions occasionally and covertly intermitted her pursuit in such a manner as to ascertain the degree of absorption of the other without

turning round. What their silence was charged with therefore was not only a sense of the weather, but a sense, so to speak, of its own nature. Maud Blessingbourne, when she lowered her book into her lap, closed her eyes with a conscious patience that seemed to say she waited; but it was nevertheless she who at last made the movement representing a snap of their tension. She got up and stood by the fire, into which she looked a minute; then came round and approached the window as if to see what was really going on. At this Mrs. Dyott wrote with refreshed intensity. Her little pile of letters had grown, and if a look of determination was compatible with her fair and slightly faded beauty the habit of attending to her business could always keep pace with any excursion of her thought. Yet she was the first who spoke.

"I trust your book has been interesting."

"Well enough; a little mild."

A louder throb of the tempest had blurred the sound of the words.
"A little wild?"

"Dear no--timid and tame; unless I've quite lost my sense."

"Perhaps you have," Mrs. Dyott placidly suggested--"reading so many."

Her companion made a motion of feigned despair. "Ah you take away my courage for going to my room, as I was just meaning to, for another."

"Another French one?"

"I'm afraid."

"Do you carry them by the dozen--?"

"Into innocent British homes?" Maud tried to remember. "I believe I brought three--seeing them in a shop-window as I passed through town. It never rains but it pours! But I've already read two."

"And are they the only ones you do read?"

"French ones?" Maud considered. "Oh no. D'Annunzio."

"And what's that?" Mrs. Dyott asked as she affixed a stamp.

"Oh you dear thing!" Her friend was amused, yet almost showed pity. "I know you don't read," Maud went on; "but why should you? YOU live!"

"Yes--wretchedly enough," Mrs. Dyott returned, getting her letters together. She left her place, holding them as a neat achieved handful, and came over to the fire, while Mrs. Blessingbourne turned once more to the window, where she was met by another flurry.

Maud spoke then as if moved only by the elements. "Do you expect him through all this?"

Mrs. Dyott just waited, and it had the effect, indescribably, of making everything that had gone before seem to have led up to the question. This effect was even deepened by the way she then said "Whom do you mean?"

"Why I thought you mentioned at luncheon that Colonel Voyt was to walk over. Surely he can't."

"Do you care very much?" Mrs. Dyott asked.

Her friend now hesitated. "It depends on what you call 'much.' If you mean should I like to see him--then certainly."

"Well, my dear, I think he understands you're here."

"So that as he evidently isn't coming," Maud laughed, "it's particularly flattering! Or rather," she added, giving up the prospect again, "it would be, I think, quite extraordinarily flattering if he did. Except that of course," she threw in, "he might come partly for you."

"'Partly' is charming. Thank you for 'partly.' If you ARE going upstairs, will you kindly," Mrs Dyott pursued, "put these into the box as you pass?"

The younger woman, taking the little pile of letters, considered them with envy. "Nine! You ARE good. You're always a living reproach!"

Mrs. Dyott gave a sigh. "I don't do it on purpose. The only thing, this afternoon," she went on, reverting to the other question, "would be their not having come down."

"And as to that you don't know."

"No--I don't know." But she caught even as she spoke a rat-tat-tat of the knocker, which struck her as a sign. "Ah there!"

"Then I go." And Maud whisked out.

Mrs. Dyott, left alone, moved with an air of selection to the window, and it was as so stationed, gazing out at the wild weather, that the visitor, whose delay to appear spoke of the wiping of boots and the disposal of drenched mackintosh and cap, finally found her. He was tall lean fine, with little in him, on the whole, to confirm the titular in the "Colonel Voyt" by which he was announced. But he had left the army, so that his reputation for gallantry mainly depended now on his fighting Liberalism in the House of Commons. Even these facts, however, his aspect scantily matched; partly, no doubt, because he looked, as was usually said, un-English. His black hair, cropped close, was lightly powdered with silver, and his dense glossy beard, that of an emir or a caliph, and grown for civil reasons, repeated its handsome colour and its somewhat foreign effect. His nose had a strong and shapely arch, and the dark grey of his eyes was tinted with blue. It had been said of him--in relation to these signs--that he would have struck you as a Jew had he not, in spite of his nose, struck you so much as an Irishman. Neither responsibility could in fact have been fixed upon him, and just now, at all events, he was only a pleasant weather-washed wind-battered Briton, who brought in from a struggle with the elements that he appeared quite to have enjoyed a certain amount of unremoved mud and an unusual quantity of easy expression. It was exactly the silence ensuing on the retreat of the servant and the closed door that marked between him and his hostess the degree of this ease. They met, as it were, twice: the first time while the servant was there and the second as soon as he was not. The difference was great between the two encounters, though we must add in justice to the second that its marks were at first mainly negative. This communion consisted only in their having drawn each other for a minute as close as possible--as possible, that is, with no help but the full clasp of hands. Thus they were mutually held, and the closeness was at any rate such that, for a little, though it took account of dangers, it did

without words. When words presently came the pair were talking by the fire and she had rung for tea. He had by this time asked if the note he had despatched to her after breakfast had been safely delivered.

"Yes, before luncheon. But I'm always in a state when--except for some extraordinary reason--you send such things by hand. I knew, without it, that you had come. It never fails. I'm sure when you're there--I'm sure when you're not."

He wiped, before the glass, his wet moustache. "I see. But this morning I had an impulse."

"It was beautiful. But they make me as uneasy, sometimes, your impulses, as if they were calculations; make me wonder what you have in reserve."

"Because when small children are too awfully good they die? Well, I AM a small child compared to you--but I'm not dead yet. I cling to life."

He had covered her with his smile, but she continued grave. "I'm not half so much afraid when you're nasty."

"Thank you! What then did you do," he asked, "with my note?"

"You deserve that I should have spread it out on my dressing-table--or left it, better still, in Maud Blessingbourne's room."

He wondered while he laughed. "Oh but what does SHE deserve?"

It was her gravity that continued to answer. "Yes--it would probably kill her."

"She believes so in you?"

"She believes so in YOU. So don't be TOO nice to her."

He was still looking, in the chimney-glass, at the state of his beard--brushing from it, with his handkerchief, the traces of wind and wet. "If she also then prefers me when I'm nasty it seems to me I ought to satisfy her. Shall I now at any rate see her?"

"She's so like a pea on a pan over the possibility of it that she's

pulling herself together in her room."

"Oh then we must try and keep her together. But why, graceful tender, pretty too--quite or almost as she is --doesn't she re-marry?"

Mrs. Dyott appeared--and as if the first time--to look for the reason. "Because she likes too many men."

It kept up his spirits. "And how many MAY a lady like--?"

"In order not to like any of them too much? Ah that, you know, I never found out--and it's too late now. When," she presently pursued, "did you last see her?"

He really had to think. "Would it have been since last November or so?--somewhere or other where we spent three days."

"Oh at Surreidge? I know all about that. I thought you also met afterwards."

He had again to recall. "So we did! Wouldn't it have been somewhere at Christmas? But it wasn't by arrangement!" he laughed, giving with his forefinger a little pleasant nick to his hostess's chin. Then as if something in the way she received this attention put him back to his question of a moment before: "Have you kept my note?"

She held him with her pretty eyes. "Do you want it back?"

"Ah don't speak as if I did take things--!"

She dropped her gaze to the fire. "No, you don't; not even the hard things a really generous nature often would." She quitted, however, as if to forget that, the chimney-place. "I put it THERE!"

"You've burnt it? Good!" It made him easier, but he noticed the next moment on a table the lemon-coloured volume left there by Mrs. Blessingbourne, and, taking it up for a look, immediately put it down. "You might while you were about it have burnt that too."

"You've read it?"

"Dear yes. And you?"

"No," said Mrs. Dyott; "it wasn't for me Maud brought it."

It pulled her visitor up. "Mrs. Blessingbourne brought it?"

"For such a day as this." But she wondered. "How you look! Is it so awful?"

"Oh like his others." Something had occurred to him; his thought was already far. "Does she know?"

"Know what?"

"Why anything."

But the door opened too soon for Mrs. Dyott, who could only murmur quickly--"Take care!"

CHAPTER II

It was in fact Mrs. Blessingbourne, who had under her arm the book she had gone up for--a pair of covers showing this time a pretty, a candid blue. She was followed next minute by the servant, who brought in tea, the consumption of which, with the passage of greetings, inquiries and other light civilities between the two visitors, occupied a quarter of an hour. Mrs. Dyott meanwhile, as a contribution to so much amenity, mentioned to Maud that her fellow guest wished to scold her for the books she read--a statement met by this friend with the remark that he must first be sure about them. But as soon as he had picked up the new, the blue volume he broke out into a frank "Dear, dear!"

"Have you read that too?" Mrs. Dyott inquired. "How much you'll have to talk over together! The other one," she explained to him, "Maud speaks of as terribly tame."

"Ah I must have that out with her! You don't feel the extraordinary force of the fellow?" Voyt went on to Mrs. Blessingbourne.

And so, round the hearth, they talked--talked soon, while they warmed their toes, with zest enough to make it seem as happy a chance as any of the quieter opportunities their imprisonment might have involved. Mrs. Blessingbourne did feel, it then appeared, the force of the fellow, but she had her reserves and reactions, in which Voyt was much interested. Mrs. Dyott rather detached herself, mainly gazing, as she leaned back, at the fire; she intervened, however, enough to relieve Maud of the sense of being listened to. That sense, with Maud, was too apt to convey that one was listened to for a fool. "Yes, when I read a novel I mostly read a French one," she had said to Voyt in answer to a question about her usual practice; "for I seem with it to get hold more of the real thing--to get more life for my money. Only I'm not so infatuated with them but that sometimes for months and months on end I don't read any fiction at all."

The two books were now together beside them. "Then when you begin again you read a mass?"

"Dear no. I only keep up with three or four authors."

He laughed at this over the cigarette he had been allowed to light. "I like your 'keeping up,' and keeping up in particular with 'authors.'"

"One must keep up with somebody," Mrs. Dyott threw off.

"I daresay I'm ridiculous," Mrs. Blessingbourne conceded without heeding it; "but that's the way we express ourselves in my part of the country."

"I only alluded," said Voyt, "to the tremendous conscience of your sex. It's more than mine can keep up with. You take everything too hard. But if you can't read the novel of British and American manufacture, heaven knows I'm at one with you. It seems really to show our sense of life as the sense of puppies and kittens."

"Well," Maud more patiently returned, "I'm told all sorts of people are now doing wonderful things; but somehow I remain outside."

"Ah it's THEY, it's our poor twangers and twaddlers who remain outside. They pick up a living in the street. And who indeed

would want them in?"

Mrs. Blessingbourne seemed unable to say, and yet at the same time to have her idea. The subject, in truth, she evidently found, was not so easy to handle. "People lend me things, and I try; but at the end of fifty pages--"

"There you are! Yes--heaven help us!"

"But what I mean," she went on, "isn't that I don't get woefully weary of the eternal French thing. What's THEIR sense of life?"

"Ah voila!" Mrs. Dyott softly sounded.

"Oh but it IS one; you can make it out," Voyt promptly declared. "They do what they feel, and they feel more things than we. They strike so many more notes, and with so different a hand. When it comes to any account of a relation say between a man and a woman--I mean an intimate or a curious or a suggestive one--where are we compared to them? They don't exhaust the subject, no doubt," he admitted; "but we don't touch it, don't even skim it. It's as if we denied its existence, its possibility. You'll doubtless tell me, however," he went on, "that as all such relations ARE for us at the most much simpler we can only have all round less to say about them."

She met this imputation with the quickest amusement. "I beg your pardon. I don't think I shall tell you anything of the sort. I don't know that I even agree with your premiss."

"About such relations?" He looked agreeably surprised. "You think we make them larger?--or subtler?"

Mrs. Blessingbourne leaned back, not looking, like Mrs. Dyott, at the fire, but at the ceiling. "I don't know what I think."

"It's not that she doesn't know," Mrs. Dyott remarked. "It's only that she doesn't say."

But Voyt had this time no eye for their hostess. For a moment he watched Maud. "It sticks out of you, you know, that you've yourself written something. Haven't you--and published? I've a notion I could read YOU."

"When I do publish," she said without moving, "you'll be the last one I shall tell. I HAVE," she went on, "a lovely subject, but it would take an amount of treatment--!"

"Tell us then at least what it is."

At this she again met his eyes. "Oh to tell it would be to express it, and that's just what I can't do. What I meant to say just now," she added, "was that the French, to my sense, give us only again and again, for ever and ever, the same couple. There they are once more, as one has had them to satiety, in that yellow thing, and there I shall certainly again find them in the blue."

"Then why do you keep reading about them?" Mrs. Dyott demanded.

Maud cast about. "I don't!" she sighed. "At all events, I shan't any more. I give it up."

"You've been looking for something, I judge," said Colonel Voyt, "that you're not likely to find. It doesn't exist."

"What is it?" Mrs. Dyott desired to know.

"I never look," Maud remarked, "for anything but an interest."

"Naturally. But your interest," Voyt replied, "is in something different from life."

"Ah not a bit! I LOVE life in art, though I hate it anywhere else. It's the poverty of the life those people show, and the awful bounders, of both sexes, that they represent."

"Oh now we have you!" her interlocutor laughed. "To me, when all's said and done, they seem to be--as near as art can come--in the truth of the truth. It can only take what life gives it, though it certainly may be a pity that that isn't better. Your complaint of their monotony is a complaint of their conditions. When you say we get always the same couple what do you mean but that we get always the same passion? Of course we do!" Voyt pursued. "If what you're looking for is another, that's what you won't anywhere find."

Maud for a while said nothing, and Mrs. Dyott seemed to wait. "Well, I suppose I'm looking, more than anything else, for a decent woman."

"Oh then you mustn't look for her in pictures of passion. That's not her element nor her whereabouts."

Mrs. Blessingbourne weighed the objection. "Does it not depend on what you mean by passion?"

"I think I can mean only one thing: the enemy to behaviour."

"Oh I can imagine passions that are on the contrary friends to it."

Her fellow-guest thought. "Doesn't it depend perhaps on what you mean by behaviour?"

"Dear no. Behaviour's just behaviour--the most definite thing in the world."

"Then what do you mean by the 'interest' you just now spoke of? The picture of that definite thing?"

"Yes--call it that. Women aren't ALWAYS vicious, even when they're--"

"When they're what?" Voyt pressed.

"When they're unhappy. They can be unhappy and good."

"That one doesn't for a moment deny. But can they be 'good' and interesting?"

"That must be Maud's subject!" Mrs. Dyott interposed. "To show a woman who IS. I'm afraid, my dear," she continued, "you could only show yourself."

"You'd show then the most beautiful specimen conceivable"--and Voyt addressed himself to Maud. "But doesn't it prove that life is, against your contention, more interesting than art? Life you embellish and elevate; but art would find itself able to do nothing with you, and, on such impossible terms, would ruin you."

The colour in her faint consciousness gave beauty to her stare. "Ruin' me?"

"He means," Mrs. Dyott again indicated, "that you'd ruin 'art.'"

"Without on the other hand"--Voyt seemed to assent--"its giving at all a coherent impression of you."

"She wants her romance cheap!" said Mrs. Dyott.

"Oh no--I should be willing to pay for it. I don't see why the romance--since you give it that name--should be all, as the French inveterately make it, for the women who are bad."

"Oh they pay for it!" said Mrs. Dyott.

"DO they?"

"So at least"--Mrs. Dyott a little corrected herself--"one has gathered (for I don't read your books, you know!) that they're usually shown as doing."

Maud wondered, but looking at Voyt, "They're shown often, no doubt, as paying for their badness. But are they shown as paying for their romance?"

"My dear lady," said Voyt, "their romance is their badness. There isn't any other. It's a hard law, if you will, and a strange, but goodness has to go without that luxury. Isn't to BE good just exactly, all round, to go without?" He put it before her kindly and clearly--regretfully too, as if he were sorry the truth should be so sad. He and she, his pleasant eyes seemed to say, would, had they had the making of it, have made it better. "One has heard it before--at least I have; one has heard your question put. But always, when put to a mind not merely muddled, for an inevitable answer. 'Why don't you, cher monsieur, give us the drama of virtue?' 'Because, chere madame, the high privilege of virtue is precisely to avoid drama.' The adventures of the honest lady? The honest lady hasn't, can't possibly have, adventures."

Mrs. Blessingbourne only met his eyes at first, smiling with some intensity. "Doesn't it depend a little on what you call adventures?"

"My poor Maud," said Mrs. Dyott as if in compassion for sophistry so simple, "adventures are just adventures. That's all you can make of them!"

But her friend talked for their companion and as if without hearing. "Doesn't it depend a good deal on what you call drama?" Maud spoke as one who had already thought it out. "Doesn't it depend on what you call romance?"

Her listener gave these arguments his very best attention. "Of course you may call things anything you like--speak of them as one thing and mean quite another. But why should it depend on anything? Behind these words we use--the adventure, the novel, the drama, the romance, the situation, in short, as we most comprehensively say--behind them all stands the same sharp fact which they all in their different ways represent."

"Precisely!" Mrs. Dyott was full of approval.

Maud however was full of vagueness. "What great fact?"

"The fact of a relation. The adventure's a relation; the relation's an adventure. The romance, the novel, the drama are the picture of one. The subject the novelist treats is the rise, the formation, the development, the climax and for the most part the decline of one. And what is the honest lady doing on that side of the town?"

Mrs. Dyott was more pointed. "She doesn't so much as FORM a relation."

But Maud bore up. "Doesn't it depend again on what you call a relation?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Dyott, "if a gentleman picks up her pocket-handkerchief--"

"Ah even that's one," their friend laughed, "if she has thrown it to him. We can only deal with one that is one."

"Surely," Maud replied. "But if it's an innocent one--"

"Doesn't it depend a good deal," Mrs. Dyott asked, "on what you call innocent?"

"You mean that the adventures of innocence have so often been the material of fiction? Yes," Voyt replied; "that's exactly what the bored reader complains of. He has asked for bread and been given a

stone. What is it but, with absolute directness, a question of interest or, as people say, of the story? What's a situation undeveloped but a subject lost? If a relation stops, where's the story? If it doesn't stop, where's the innocence? It seems to me you must choose. It would be very pretty if it were otherwise, but that's how we flounder. Art is our floundering shown."

Mrs. Blessingbourne--and with an air of deference scarce supported perhaps by its sketchiness--kept her deep eyes on this definition. "But sometimes we flounder out."

It immediately touched in Colonel Voyt the spring of a genial derision. "That's just where I expected YOU would! One always sees it come."

"He has, you notice," Mrs. Dyott parenthesised to Maud, "seen it come so often I; and he has always waited for it and met it."

"Met it, dear lady, simply enough! It's the old story, Mrs. Blessingbourne. The relation's innocent that the heroine gets out of. The book's innocent that's the story of her getting out. But what the devil--in the name of innocence--was she doing IN?"

Mrs. Dyott promptly echoed the question. "You have to be in, you know, to GET out. So there you are already with your relation. It's the end of your goodness."

"And the beginning," said Voyt, "of your play!"

"Aren't they all, for that matter, even the worst," Mrs. Dyott pursued, "supposed SOME time or other to get out? But if meanwhile they've been in, however briefly, long enough to adorn a tale?"

"They've been in long enough to point a moral. That is to point ours!" With which, and as if a sudden flush of warmer light had moved him, Colonel Voyt got up. The veil of the storm had parted over a great red sunset.

Mrs. Dyott also was on her feet, and they stood before his charming antagonist, who, with eyes lowered and a somewhat fixed smile, had not moved.

"We've spoiled her subject!" the elder lady sighed.

"Well," said Voyt, "it's better to spoil an artist's subject than to spoil his reputation. I mean," he explained to Maud with his indulgent manner, "his appearance of knowing what he has got hold of, for that, in the last resort, is his happiness."

She slowly rose at this, facing him with an aspect as handsomely mild as his own. "You can't spoil my happiness."

He held her hand an instant as he took leave. "I wish I could add to it!"

CHAPTER III

When he had quitted them and Mrs. Dyott had candidly asked if her friend had found him rude or crude, Maud replied--though not immediately--that she had feared showing only too much how charming she found him. But if Mrs. Dyott took this it was to weigh the sense. "How could you show it too much?"

"Because I always feel that that's my only way of showing anything. It's absurd, if you like," Mrs. Blessingbourne pursued, "but I never know, in such intense discussions, what strange impression I may give."

Her companion looked amused. "Was it intense?"

"_I_ was," Maud frankly confessed.

"Then it's a pity you were so wrong. Colonel Voyt, you know, is right." Mrs. Blessingbourne at this gave one of the slow soft silent headshakes to which she often resorted and which, mostly accompanied by the light of cheer, had somehow, in spite of the small obstinacy that smiled in them, a special grace. With this grace, for a moment, her friend, looking her up and down, appeared impressed, yet not too much so to take the next minute a decision. "Oh my dear, I'm sorry to differ from any one so lovely--for you're awfully beautiful to-night, and your frock's the very nicest I've ever seen you wear. But he's as right as he can be."

Maud repeated her motion. "Not so right, at all events as he

thinks he is. Or perhaps I can say," she went on, after an instant, "that I'm not so wrong. I do know a little what I'm talking about."

Mrs. Dyott continued to study her. "You ARE vexed. You naturally don't like it--such destruction."

"Destruction?"

"Of your illusion."

"I HAVE no illusion. If I had moreover it wouldn't be destroyed. I have on the whole, I think, my little decency."

Mrs. Dyott stared. "Let us grant it for argument. What, then?"

"Well, I've also my little drama."

"An attachment?"

"An attachment."

"That you shouldn't have?"

"That I shouldn't have."

"A passion?"

"A passion."

"Shared?"

"Ah thank goodness, no!"

Mrs. Dyott continued to gaze. "The object's unaware--?"

"Utterly."

Mrs. Dyott turned it over. "Are you sure?"

"Sure."

"That's what you call your decency? But isn't it," Mrs. Dyott asked, "rather his?"

"Dear no. It's only his good fortune."

Mrs. Dyott laughed. "But yours, darling--your good fortune: where does THAT come in?"

"Why, in my sense of the romance of it."

"The romance of what? Of his not knowing?"

"Of my not wanting him to. If I did"--Maud had touchingly worked it out--"where would be my honesty?"

The inquiry, for an instant, held her friend, yet only, it seemed, for a stupefaction that was almost amusement. "Can you want or not want as you like? Where in the world, if you don't want, is your romance?"

Mrs. Blessingbourne still wore her smile, and she now, with a light gesture that matched it, just touched the region of her heart. "There!"

Her companion admiringly marvelled. "A lovely place for it, no doubt!--but not quite a place, that I can see, to make the sentiment a relation."

"Why not? What more is required for a relation for me?"

"Oh all sorts of things, I should say! And many more, added to those, to make it one for the person you mention."

"Ah that I don't pretend it either should be or CAN be. I only speak for myself."

This was said in a manner that made Mrs. Dyott, with a visible mixture of impressions, suddenly turn away. She indulged in a vague movement or two, as if to look for something; then again found herself near her friend, on whom with the same abruptness, in fact with a strange sharpness, she conferred a kiss that might have represented either her tribute to exalted consistency or her idea of a graceful close of the discussion. "You deserve that one should speak FOR you!"

Her companion looked cheerful and secure. "How CAN you without

knowing--?"

"Oh by guessing! It's not--?"

But that was as far as Mrs. Dyott could get. "It's not," said Maud, "any one you've ever seen."

"Ah then I give you up!"

And Mrs. Dyott conformed for the rest of Maud's stay to the spirit of this speech. It was made on a Saturday night, and Mrs. Blessingbourne remained till the Wednesday following, an interval during which, as the return of fine weather was confirmed by the Sunday, the two ladies found a wider range of action. There were drives to be taken, calls made, objects of interest seen at a distance; with the effect of much easy talk and still more easy silence. There had been a question of Colonel Voyt's probable return on the Sunday, but the whole time passed without a sign from him, and it was merely mentioned by Mrs. Dyott, in explanation, that he must have been suddenly called, as he was so liable to be, to town. That this in fact was what had happened he made clear to her on Thursday afternoon, when, walking over again late, he found her alone. The consequence of his Sunday letters had been his taking, that day, the 4.15. Mrs. Voyt had gone back on Thursday, and he now, to settle on the spot the question of a piece of work begun at his place, had rushed down for a few hours in anticipation of the usual collective move for the week's end. He was to go up again by the late train, and had to count a little--a fact accepted by his hostess with the hard pliancy of practice--his present happy moments. Too few as these were, however, he found time to make of her an inquiry or two not directly bearing on their situation. The first was a recall of the question for which Mrs. Blessingbourne's entrance on the previous Saturday had arrested her answer. Had that lady the idea of anything between them?

"No. I'm sure. There's one idea she has got," Mrs. Dyott went on; "but it's quite different and not so very wonderful."

"What then is it?"

"Well, that she's herself in love."

Voyt showed his interest. "You mean she told you?"

"I got it out of her."

He showed his amusement. "Poor thing! And with whom?"

"With you."

His surprise, if the distinction might be made, was less than his wonder. "You got that out of her too?"

"No--it remains in. Which is much the best way for it. For you to know it would be to end it."

He looked rather cheerfully at sea. "Is that then why you tell me?"

"I mean for her to know you know it. Therefore it's in your interest not to let her."

"I see," Voyt after a moment returned. "Your real calculation is that my interest will be sacrificed to my vanity--so that, if your other idea is just, the flame will in fact, and thanks to her morbid conscience, expire by her taking fright at seeing me so pleased. But I promise you," he declared, "that she shan't see it. So there you are!" She kept her eyes on him and had evidently to admit after a little that there she was. Distinct as he had made the case, however, he wasn't yet quite satisfied. "Why are you so sure I'm the man?"

"From the way she denies you."

"You put it to her?"

"Straight. If you hadn't been she'd of course have confessed to you--to keep me in the dark about the real one."

Poor Voyt laughed out again. "Oh you dear souls!"

"Besides," his companion pursued, "I wasn't in want of that evidence."

"Then what other had you?"

"Her state before you came--which was what made me ask you how much you had seen her. And her state after it," Mrs. Dyott added. "And

her state," she wound up, "while you were here."

"But her state while I was here was charming."

"Charming. That's just what I say."

She said it in a tone that placed the matter in its right light--a light in which they appeared kindly, quite tenderly, to watch Maud wander away into space with her lovely head bent under a theory rather too big for it. Voyt's last word, however, was that there was just enough in it--in the theory--for them to allow that she had not shown herself, on the occasion of their talk, wholly bereft of sense. Her consciousness, if they let it alone--as they of course after this mercifully must--WAS, in the last analysis, a kind of shy romance. Not a romance like their own, a thing to make the fortune of any author up to the mark--one who should have the invention or who COULD have the courage; but a small scared starved subjective satisfaction that would do her no harm and nobody else any good. Who but a duffer--he stuck to his contention--would see the shadow of a "story" in it?



THE GREAT LOVER

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *1914 and Other Poems*, by Rupert Brooke

I have been so great a lover: filled my days
So proudly with the splendour of Love's praise,
The pain, the calm, and the astonishment,
Desire illimitable, and still content,
And all dear names men use, to cheat despair,
For the perplexed and viewless streams that bear
Our hearts at random down the dark of life.
Now, ere the unthinking silence on that strife
Steals down, I would cheat drowsy Death so far,
My night shall be remembered for a star
That outshone all the suns of all men's days.
Shall I not crown them with immortal praise
Whom I have loved, who have given me, dared with me
High secrets, and in darkness knelt to see
The inenarrable godhead of delight?

Love is a flame;--we have beaconed the world's night.
A city:--and we have built it, these and I.
An emperor:--we have taught the world to die.
So, for their sakes I loved, ere I go hence,
And the high cause of Love's magnificence,
And to keep loyalties young, I'll write those names
Golden for ever, eagles, crying flames,
And set them as a banner, that men may know,
To dare the generations, burn, and blow
Out on the wind of Time, shining and streaming....
These I have loved:

White plates and cups, clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;
Wet roofs, beneath the lamp-light; the strong crust
Of friendly bread; and many-tasting food;
Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;
And radiant raindrops couching in cool flowers;
And flowers themselves, that sway through sunny hours,
Dreaming of moths that drink them under the moon;
Then, the cool kindliness of sheets, that soon
Smooth away trouble; and the rough male kiss
Of blankets; grainy wood; live hair that is
Shining and free; blue-massing clouds; the keen
Unpassioned beauty of a great machine;
The benison of hot water; furs to touch;
The good smell of old clothes; and other such--
The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
Hair's fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
About dead leaves and last year's ferns....

Dear names,
And thousand other throng to me! Royal flames;
Sweet water's dimpling laugh from tap or spring;
Holes in the ground; and voices that do sing;
Voices in laughter, too; and body's pain,
Soon turned to peace; and the deep-panting train;
Firm sands; the little dulling edge of foam
That browns and dwindle as the wave goes home;
And washen stones, gay for an hour; the cold
Graveness of iron; moist black earthen mould;
Sleep; and high places; footprints in the dew;
And oaks; and brown horse-chestnuts, glossy-new;
And new-peeled sticks; and shining pools on grass;--
All these have been my loves. And these shall pass,
Whatever passes not, in the great hour,
Nor all my passion, all my prayers, have power

To hold them with me through the gate of Death.
They'll play deserter, turn with the traitor breath,
Break the high bond we made, and sell Love's trust
And sacramented covenant to the dust.
--Oh, never a doubt but, somewhere, I shall wake,
And give what's left of love again, and make
New friends, now strangers....
 But the best I've known,
Stays here, and changes, breaks, grows old, is blown
About the winds of the world, and fades from brains
Of living men, and dies.
 Nothing remains.

O dear my loves, O faithless, once again
This one last gift I give: that after men
Shall know, and later lovers, far-removed,
Praise you, "All these were lovely"; say, "He loved."

MATAIEA, 1914

HÉLAS!

The Project Gutenberg eBook, *Charmides and Other Poems*, by Oscar Wilde

TO drift with every passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute on which can winds can play,
Is it for this that I have given away
Mine ancient wisdom and austere control?
Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll
Scrawled over on some boyish holiday
With idle songs for pipe and virelay,
Which do but mar the secret of the whole.
Surely there was a time I might have trod
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God:
Is that time dead? lo! with a little rod
I did but touch the honey of romance—
And must I lose a soul's inheritance?

THE PRAIRIE BATTLEMENTS

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Chinese Nightingale*, by Vachel Lindsay

(To Edgar Lee Masters, with great respect.)

Here upon the prairie
Is our ancestral hall.
Agate is the dome,
Cornelian the wall.
Ghouls are in the cellar,
But fays upon the stairs.
And here lived old King Silver Dreams,
Always at his prayers.

Here lived grey Queen Silver Dreams,
Always singing psalms,
And haughty Grandma Silver Dreams,
Throned with folded palms.
Here played cousin Alice.
Her soul was best of all.
And every fairy loved her,
In our ancestral hall.

Alice has a prairie grave.
The King and Queen lie low,
And aged Grandma Silver Dreams,
Four tombstones in a row.
But still in snow and sunshine
Stands our ancestral hall.
Agate is the dome,
Cornelian the wall.
And legends walk about,
And proverbs, with proud airs.
Ghouls are in the cellar,
But fays upon the stairs.



THE COBWEB

The Project Gutenberg eBook, *Beasts and Super-Beasts*, by Saki

The farmhouse kitchen probably stood where it did as a matter of accident or haphazard choice; yet its situation might have been planned by a master-strategist in farmhouse architecture. Dairy and poultry-yard, and herb garden, and all the busy places of the farm seemed to lead by easy access into its wide flagged haven, where there was room for everything and where muddy boots left traces that were easily swept away. And yet, for all that it stood so well in the centre of human bustle, its long, latticed window, with the wide window-seat, built into an embrasure beyond the huge fireplace, looked out on a wild spreading view of hill and heather and wooded combe. The window nook made almost a little room in itself, quite the pleasantest room in the farm as far as situation and capabilities went. Young Mrs. Ladbruk, whose husband had just come into the farm by way of inheritance, cast covetous eyes on this snug corner, and her fingers itched to make it bright and cosy with chintz curtains and bowls of flowers, and a shelf or two of old china. The musty farm parlour, looking out on to a prim, cheerless garden imprisoned within high, blank walls, was not a room that lent itself readily either to comfort or decoration.

“When we are more settled I shall work wonders in the way of making the kitchen habitable,” said the young woman to her occasional visitors. There was an unspoken wish in those words, a wish which was unconfessed as well as unspoken. Emma Ladbruk was the mistress of the farm; jointly with her husband she might have her say, and to a certain extent her way, in ordering its affairs. But she was not mistress of the kitchen.

On one of the shelves of an old dresser, in company with chipped sauce-boats, pewter jugs, cheese-graters, and paid bills, rested a worn and ragged Bible, on whose front page was the record, in faded ink, of a baptism dated ninety-four years ago. “Martha Crale” was the name written on that yellow page. The yellow, wrinkled old dame who hobbled and muttered about the kitchen, looking like a dead autumn leaf which the winter winds still pushed hither and thither, had once been Martha Crale; for seventy odd years she had been Martha Mountjoy. For longer than anyone could remember she had pattered to and fro between oven and wash-house and dairy, and out to chicken-run and garden, grumbling and muttering and scolding, but working unceasingly. Emma Ladbruk, of whose coming she took as little notice as she would of a bee wandering in at a window on a summer’s day, used at first to watch her with a kind of frightened curiosity. She was so old and so much a part of the place, it

was difficult to think of her exactly as a living thing. Old Shep, the white-nozzled, stiff-limbed collie, waiting for his time to die, seemed almost more human than the withered, dried-up old woman. He had been a riotous, roystering puppy, mad with the joy of life, when she was already a tottering, hobbling dame; now he was just a blind, breathing carcase, nothing more, and she still worked with frail energy, still swept and baked and washed, fetched and carried. If there were something in these wise old dogs that did not perish utterly with death, Emma used to think to herself, what generations of ghost-dogs there must be out on those hills, that Martha had reared and fed and tended and spoken a last good-bye word to in that old kitchen. And what memories she must have of human generations that had passed away in her time. It was difficult for anyone, let alone a stranger like Emma, to get her to talk of the days that had been; her shrill, quavering speech was of doors that had been left unfastened, pails that had got mislaid, calves whose feeding-time was overdue, and the various little faults and lapses that chequer a farmhouse routine. Now and again, when election time came round, she would unstore her recollections of the old names round which the fight had waged in the days gone by. There had been a Palmerston, that had been a name down Tiverton way; Tiverton was not a far journey as the crow flies, but to Martha it was almost a foreign country. Later there had been Northcotes and Aclands, and many other newer names that she had forgotten; the names changed, but it was always Libruls and Toories, Yellows and Blues. And they always quarrelled and shouted as to who was right and who was wrong. The one they quarrelled about most was a fine old gentleman with an angry face—she had seen his picture on the walls. She had seen it on the floor too, with a rotten apple squashed over it, for the farm had changed its politics from time to time. Martha had never been on one side or the other; none of “they” had ever done the farm a stroke of good. Such was her sweeping verdict, given with all a peasant’s distrust of the outside world.

When the half-frightened curiosity had somewhat faded away, Emma Ladbruk was uncomfortably conscious of another feeling towards the old woman. She was a quaint old tradition, lingering about the place, she was part and parcel of the farm itself, she was something at once pathetic and picturesque—but she was dreadfully in the way. Emma had come to the farm full of plans for little reforms and improvements, in part the result of training in the newest ways and methods, in part the outcome of her own ideas and fancies. Reforms in the kitchen region, if those deaf old ears could have been induced to give them even a hearing, would have met with short shrift and scornful rejection, and the kitchen region spread over the zone of dairy and market business and half the work of the household. Emma, with the latest science of dead-poultry dressing at her

finger-tips, sat by, an unheeded watcher, while old Martha trussed the chickens for the market-stall as she had trussed them for nearly fourscore years—all leg and no breast. And the hundred hints anent effective cleaning and labour-lightening and the things that make for wholesomeness which the young woman was ready to impart or to put into action dropped away into nothingness before that wan, muttering, unheeding presence. Above all, the coveted window corner, that was to be a dainty, cheerful oasis in the gaunt old kitchen, stood now choked and lumbered with a litter of odds and ends that Emma, for all her nominal authority, would not have dared or cared to displace; over them seemed to be spun the protection of something that was like a human cobweb. Decidedly Martha was in the way. It would have been an unworthy meanness to have wished to see the span of that brave old life shortened by a few paltry months, but as the days sped by Emma was conscious that the wish was there, disowned though it might be, lurking at the back of her mind.

She felt the meanness of the wish come over her with a qualm of self-reproach one day when she came into the kitchen and found an unaccustomed state of things in that usually busy quarter. Old Martha was not working. A basket of corn was on the floor by her side, and out in the yard the poultry were beginning to clamour a protest of overdue feeding-time. But Martha sat huddled in a shrunken bunch on the window seat, looking out with her dim old eyes as though she saw something stranger than the autumn landscape.

“Is anything the matter, Martha?” asked the young woman.

“’Tis death, ’tis death a-coming,” answered the quavering voice; “I knew ’twere coming. I knew it. ’Tweren’t for nothing that old Shep’s been howling all morning. An’ last night I heard the screech-owl give the death-cry, and there were something white as run across the yard yesterday; ’tweren’t a cat nor a stoat, ’twere something. The fowls knew ’twere something; they all drew off to one side. Ay, there’s been warnings. I knew it were a-coming.”

The young woman’s eyes clouded with pity. The old thing sitting there so white and shrunken had once been a merry, noisy child, playing about in lanes and hay-lofts and farmhouse garrets; that had been eighty odd years ago, and now she was just a frail old body cowering under the approaching chill of the death that was coming at last to take her. It was not probable that much could be done for her, but Emma hastened away to get assistance and counsel. Her husband, she knew, was down at a tree-felling some little distance off, but she might find some other intelligent soul who knew the old woman better than she did. The farm,

she soon found out, had that faculty common to farmyards of swallowing up and losing its human population. The poultry followed her in interested fashion, and swine grunted interrogations at her from behind the bars of their styes, but barnyard and rickyard, orchard and stables and dairy, gave no reward to her search. Then, as she retraced her steps towards the kitchen, she came suddenly on her cousin, young Mr. Jim, as every one called him, who divided his time between amateur horse-dealing, rabbit-shooting, and flirting with the farm maids.

"I'm afraid old Martha is dying," said Emma. Jim was not the sort of person to whom one had to break news gently.

"Nonsense," he said; "Martha means to live to a hundred. She told me so, and she'll do it."

"She may be actually dying at this moment, or it may just be the beginning of the break-up," persisted Emma, with a feeling of contempt for the slowness and dulness of the young man.

A grin spread over his good-natured features.

"It don't look like it," he said, nodding towards the yard. Emma turned to catch the meaning of his remark. Old Martha stood in the middle of a mob of poultry scattering handfuls of grain around her. The turkey-cock, with the bronzed sheen of his feathers and the purple-red of his wattles, the gamecock, with the glowing metallic lustre of his Eastern plumage, the hens, with their ochres and buffs and umbers and their scarlet combs, and the drakes, with their bottle-green heads, made a medley of rich colour, in the centre of which the old woman looked like a withered stalk standing amid a riotous growth of gaily-hued flowers. But she threw the grain deftly amid the wilderness of beaks, and her quavering voice carried as far as the two people who were watching her. She was still harping on the theme of death coming to the farm.

"I knew 'twere a-coming. There's been signs an' warnings."

"Who's dead, then, old Mother?" called out the young man.

"'Tis young Mister Ladbruk," she shrilled back; "they've just a-carried his body in. Run out of the way of a tree that was coming down an' ran hisself on to an iron post. Dead when they picked un up. Aye, I knew 'twere coming."

And she turned to fling a handful of barley at a belated group of

guinea-fowl that came racing toward her.

* * * * *

The farm was a family property, and passed to the rabbit-shooting cousin as the next-of-kin. Emma Ladbruk drifted out of its history as a bee that had wandered in at an open window might flit its way out again. On a cold grey morning she stood waiting, with her boxes already stowed in the farm cart, till the last of the market produce should be ready, for the train she was to catch was of less importance than the chickens and butter and eggs that were to be offered for sale. From where she stood she could see an angle of the long latticed window that was to have been cosy with curtains and gay with bowls of flowers. Into her mind came the thought that for months, perhaps for years, long after she had been utterly forgotten, a white, unheeding face would be seen peering out through those latticed panes, and a weak muttering voice would be heard quavering up and down those flagged passages. She made her way to a narrow barred casement that opened into the farm larder. Old Martha was standing at a table trussing a pair of chickens for the market stall as she had trussed them for nearly fourscore years.



DECISION

By Frank M. Robinson

the Project Gutenberg EBook of Decision, by Frank M. Robinson

The captain had learned to hate. It was his profession--and his personal reason for going on. But even hatred has to be channeled for its maximum use, and no truths exist forever.

The battle alarm caught him in the middle of a dream, a dream that took place in a white house in a small town in Ohio, when both he and Alice had been very young and the grown adults he now called his children had really been little more than babies.

He rolled out of his bed immediately on hearing the gong, as any good sailor would, and slipped into his pants and shoes and felt around the bulkhead for his life jacket. He slipped into it and tightened the

buckles, then put on his cap with the captain's insignia.

He opened the hatch and stepped out into the passageway, blinking for a moment in the unaccustomed light and trying to shake away the remnants of his dream. Officers were boiling up the passageway and up the ladder, some eager ensigns dressed only in their shorts and their life jackets. It was more wise than funny, he thought slowly. Ships had gone down in a matter of seconds and anybody who spent precious moments looking for his pants or his wallet never got out.

Harry Davis, the Exec, a portly man in his fifties, burst out of his stateroom, still trying to shake the sleep from gummy lids.

The Captain shook his head, trying to alert his mind to the point where it could make sensible evaluations, and started up the corridor.

"Any idea what it is, Harry?"

Davis shook his head. "Not unless it's what we've been expecting."

What we've been expecting. The Captain grasped the iron piping that served for railings and jogged up the ladder. Fifty miles north, lolling in the North Sea and holding maneuvers, was the _Josef Dzugashvili_, a hundred thousand tons of the finest aircraft carrier the Asiatic Combine had produced, carrying close to a hundred Mig-72's and perhaps half a dozen light bombers.

The _Josef_ had been operating there for nearly a week. The _Oahu_ had been detached from the Atlantic Fleet only a few days ago, to combat the possible threat. Maybe the ships were only acting as stake-outs for the politicians, the Captain thought slowly. The tinder waiting for the spark. And it wouldn't take much.

A curious pilot who might venture too close, a gunner with a nervous temperament ...

And now, maybe, this was it. It had to come some day. You couldn't turn the other cheek forever. And he, for one, was glad. He had spent almost all his life waiting for this. A chance to get even ...

Davis opened the hatch to the wheelhouse and the Captain slipped in, closing it tight behind him. It was pitch black and it took his eyes a few moments to adjust to it. When they had, he could make out the shadowed forms of the OD, the first class quartermaster at the wheel, and the radarman hunched over the repeater, the scope a phosphorescent blur in the darkness.

The ports were open in violation of GQ--it was a hot summer night--and

the slight breeze that blew off the swelling sea smelled clean and cool. It was the only kind of air for a man to breathe, the Captain mused abstractly.

He glanced sharply through the ports. There was nothing that bulked on the dark horizon, and so far as he could tell, all the stars were fixed--there were none of the tell-tale flashes of jet exhausts.

He walked over to where the OD stood by the radar scope, seemingly fascinated by the picture on it. McCandless had the watch, a young lieutenant of not more than twenty-five but one with good sense and sound judgment nonetheless. A man who wasn't prone to panic, the Captain thought.

"What's the situation, Lieutenant?"

McCandless' voice was nervous. "I'm not exactly sure, sir. Not ... yet."

A brief regret at an interrupted dream of Ohio flickered in the back of the Captain's mind.

"What do you mean, you're not sure?" His voice was a little sharper than he intended, a little more querulous than he had meant it to be. It was, he thought, the voice of an old man, annoyed at having his sleep disturbed.

[Illustration]

The younger man wasn't disturbed by the sharpness and the Captain's estimation of McCandless went up another notch.

"Ten minutes ago CIC reported an object approaching us from the south at an altitude of fifty miles."

Approaching from the south, the Captain thought. So it couldn't have been from the _Josef_. And fifty ... miles ... up. That was two hundred and fifty thousand feet. A guided missile, perhaps? But whose? There were only friendly countries to the south.

"It's passed directly overhead," McCandless continued, consciously trying to make his voice sound factual, "and continued in the direction of _Josef_. It settled towards sea level, then stopped a mile up."

"Stopped, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. It's hovering over the _Josef_ now." McCandless paused. When he started again, his voice was shaking. It was funny he hadn't noticed it before, the Captain thought. You could almost smell the fear in the

wheelhouse. "CIC estimated its speed overhead as being in excess of a thousand miles an hour and its size about that of the _Josef_ itself."

The Captain felt the sweat gather on his temples and ran his hand half angrily over his forehead and through his thinning silver hair. He was too old a man to let fear affect him any more and he was too tired a man to waste his energy mopping his forehead every few minutes in a gesture that would show his feelings to the crew. Maybe it was only vanity, he thought, but when your muscles went soft and started pushing back against your belt and your hair turned gray and started a strategic retreat, you tended to take more care of your reputation. It wasn't as fragile as the rest of you, it didn't tarnish with the gold of your braid or sag with your muscles. And he had enjoyed a reputation as a fearless man of sound judgment.

"Did you order up a drone plane?"

McCandless nodded in the dark. "It went up a few minutes ago, sir. The television picture should be coming in any moment."

It would be an infra-red picture, the Captain thought. It wouldn't show too much, provided the plane could get close enough to get anything at all, but it would show something.

"Have you made any evaluations, Lieutenant?"

He could feel the tenseness build up again in the compartment. Everybody was listening intently, waiting for the first semi-official hint of what had gotten them up in the middle of the night.

Then McCandless voiced what the Captain had already taken to be a foregone conclusion.

"I think it's a spaceship, sir." McCandless waved at the stars beyond the port. "From some place out there."

* * * * *

The picture started coming in at oh three hundred. The Captain and Davis and McCandless clustered about the infra-red screen, watching the shadowy picture build up.

It wasn't much of a picture, the Captain thought. It was vague and indistinct and the drone plane was shooting the scene from too far away. But he could make out the _Dzugashvili_, a gloomy shape that bulked huge in the water, the planes clustered on its deck like small, black flies. But that wasn't what interested him. He had seen restricted photographs and complete descriptions and evaluations of the _Josef_'s fighting

capabilities before. What was of vastly more importance was the huge structure that hovered above the _Josef_, a mile overhead. A structure that blocked out the stars over a roughly rectangular area the same size as the _Josef_ itself.

McCandless and Davis were still straining their eyes for details of the alien ship by the time the Captain had glanced away and was formulating policy. The picture was too vague, he thought. There was nothing that could be seen that would tell you much about the ship. And if they were correct in thinking it was a ... his mind hesitated at the thought ... spaceship, then it would be impossible to tell whether certain features were armament or not. And it would be futile to speculate on the capabilities of that armament.

McCandless and Davis finished with their inspection of the screen and turned to the Captain, waiting for orders.

"Recall the plane," the Captain said. "Send it out again at dawn. And send a message to Radio Washington, giving them complete details. You may relax GQ but keep the gunners at their posts and the pilots standing by." The fantastic became far more real when you dealt with it matter-of-factly, he thought.

He started for the hatch. "I'll expect you down for breakfast," he said to Davis. "You, too, Lieutenant. You've been in on this from the start, you know more than the rest of us."

Which was quite enough flattery for a young lieutenant in one day, he thought. It was far more than he had ever received when he had been a lieutenant.

Back in his stateroom, the Captain went directly to the small lavatory, filled the washbowl, and plunged his face into the cold water. He was getting old, he thought for the hundredth time that morning. Creeping old age where you still awoke readily enough but found it more and more difficult to keep awake. You couldn't rid yourself of the temptation of going back to bed and dreaming again--dreaming, perhaps, of an Ohio town that his own imagination had gilded and varnished and adorned until sometimes he thought it existed only in his imagination and not in reality at all.

He scrubbed at his face until a tingle of alertness came to it, then went back to the main compartment. The steward had laid out the silver, and Davis and McCandless were already there. Davis completely relaxed in the atmosphere that could only exist between an Executive Officer and a Captain. The Exec, as both he and the Captain well knew, was the only man on board with whom the Captain could maintain a relationship that was something other than professional. Not necessarily friendly but ...

more relaxed.

McCandless sat in the leather upholstered chair by the table, stiff and self-conscious. The hope of the nation, the Captain thought. Provided that they learned how to hate and to keep that hate alive as long as he had kept his.

His own boy had been about McCandless' age, he thought suddenly.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Davis asked.

The Captain sat down at the table. The coffee was hot and he could smell the eggs that the steward was frying in the small galley. He tucked in a napkin at his neck. It was old-fashioned but practical, he thought. You dribbled down the front, you didn't spill things in your lap.

"It isn't exactly up to me, Harry. It's up to Washington." He poured out three cups of coffee and handed one to Davis and one to McCandless. The Lieutenant clutched the cup in a deathlike grip, as if the ship were doing forty-degree rolls and he might lose it any minute. "I asked you up to breakfast to get your ideas on it. I have my own but on something like this, anybody's ideas are as good as mine. Maybe better."

Davis frowned and rubbed the tip of his nose thoughtfully. "Well, it looks to me, Bill, as if we have a situation here where an unknown ship from somewhere--I'm not saying where--has investigated two ships on maneuvers and finally chosen to hover over one, for what reasons we don't know. To me it looks like the only things we can do is notify Washington and stand by for orders."

Great God, the Captain thought, disgusted, there was nothing worse than a Commander bucking for four stripes. A more cautious man didn't exist on the face of the Earth nor, possibly, a more fearful one. Fear that whatever decision you made would be the wrong one and the Promotion Board would pass you by. So you carefully avoided making any decisions at all. He had been the same way himself. You salved your lack of guts with the knowledge that once you made captain, things would be different and you could assert yourself, be the man you had always considered yourself to be. Only once you became a captain things didn't change a bit, because then you were trying to get the Promotion Board to recommend you for Admiral. The only men in the Navy who had any guts were the young men who didn't know any better and the old bastards who had made Admiral and no longer had any ambition as far as rank went.

* * * * *

He turned to McCandless. "You, Lieutenant?"

McCandless licked dry lips.

"I think it's from out in space, sir. Maybe it's an exploration party, but more than likely it's an armed scouting party."

"What makes you say that?"

McCandless leaned forward, his concern over his cup of coffee momentarily forgotten. "I think if it was an exploration party they would have stopped at some point of civilization first. In all likelihood a city, a big city. But we've received no reports of any ship landing near a city. At least, not yet." He paused, a little self-consciously. "It wouldn't be difficult to tell that we're part of the fighting forces of this planet, and I think it's just luck that it chose the _Josef_ instead of us. I think the alien ship is investigating the _Josef_. Or will shortly."

Davis lit a cigarette, a half amused smile on his face. "For what purpose?"

"To test the armament. See how good we are on the defensive."

"What do you think they want?" the Captain asked curiously.

McCandless hesitated, then blurted it out.

"The whole world, sir!"

* * * * *

At oh five hundred the sun was just breaking over the horizon, coating the heavy green seas with a soft covering of pink gold. It was going to be another hot day, the Captain thought, one where the heat stood off the water in little waves and the sweat ran down your back and soaked your khakis. And with GQ, the rubber life jackets would make it about ten times as bad.

He stood on the bridge for a moment, admiring the sunrise and smelling the brisk salt air, then walked into the wheelhouse.

The drone plane had been up for half an hour. By this time it should have a clearer picture of the object that hovered over the _Josef_.

It did. The object was dun colored, the color of storm clouds on a cold winter's day. Big, easily as big as the _Josef_, and tubular shaped, slightly flattened on the bottom. There was nothing that could be identified as gun ports but they probably didn't use guns. He wondered just what their armament was.

He turned to the radarman on watch.

"Has the _Josef_ moved any?"

The man nodded. "Yes, sir. About oh four hundred they steamed ten miles north at top speed."

"The object kept up with them?"

"Yes, sir. It's never left them, sir. Same position directly overhead at all times."

The captain of the _Josef_ must have realized that he couldn't get away from his overhead observer and probably froze in position, afraid of what would happen if he continued to run for it. He'd probably stay there until the alien ship made some hostile move or he got instructions from home.

The Captain walked back to the bridge. The ship was strangely silent. There were no jets warming up on the flight deck, there were no sounds of chipping hammers. Except for the planes overhead, it was a quiet summer day, one of those days when a perfectly smooth sea looks like a sheet of plate glass.

He glanced down at the sides of the _Oahu_. Tiny figures were huddled by the anti-aircraft guns, their helmets glinting in the sun. A tight ship, he thought, a ship that was ready for anything.

McCandless came out on the bridge, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep. He stood a respectful distance from the Captain, a little to the right and just behind.

"Beautiful day, isn't it, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. It is, sir. Very fine day."

Sir. That was the one reason why he tolerated Davis, the Captain thought. Just to hear somebody call him by his first name and treat him as something other than a symbol of rank.

"If your theory is correct, Lieutenant," he mused aloud, "then the alien ship should be opening fire--if that's what you would call it--any minute now."

"Yes, sir." McCandless brushed his mouth with his hand--probably surreptitiously removing a wad of gum, the Captain thought. "I was wondering what you would do, sir, if the alien ship opens fire on the

Josef."

"If it wasn't against regulations, I'd issue a couple of cans of beer per man."

McCandless gaped. "I--I don't understand you, sir."

"If they finish off the _Josef_, Lieutenant, it'll save us the trouble. For my money, I'd be tickled pink if the Combine sent reinforcements and it really developed into a fracas."

McCandless turned slightly so the Captain could no longer read his face. The Captain wondered if it was intentional.

"I ... I guess I just took it for granted that we'd join forces against the aliens, sir. It seemed like the natural thing to do."

So McCandless had thought they'd go to the rescue of the _Josef_, the Captain thought slowly. To the rescue. The phrase had a funny sound to it when you coupled it with the Combine, an almost obscene sound.

"Lieutenant," the Captain said slowly, "history has been full of possible turning points that the United States has almost always failed to take advantage of. I think this time, just for once, we ought to play it smart. The Combine has been a threat for as long as I can remember. We've had opportunities before when we could have let two systems cancel each other out. We didn't take advantage of it then and we've regretted it ever since."

McCandless didn't reply immediately and the Captain thought to himself, why not be more honest? Why don't you tell him that all your life you've fought the Combine and the conflict has been the only thing that has lent meaning to living? You hate for thirty years and you become a slave to that hatred--you don't forget it with a snap of the fingers and go charging to the rescue like a knight in shining armor.

"The aliens are ... alien, sir," McCandless suddenly said. "The men on the _Josef_ are ... human beings."

"Are they, Mister?" The Captain hated the lecturing attitude but he couldn't help it. "They're the representatives of the Combine, aren't they? And I suppose the Combine acted like human beings during the Berlin war? I suppose the slave labor camps and the purges and the forced confessions were the products of ordinary human beings? No, Lieutenant, if the aliens have six arms and two heads they couldn't be less inhuman than the Combine has been!"

"My father was in the Pacific in the Second World War," the Lieutenant

said tightly. "There were times when we ... didn't take prisoners. And I remember my Dad saying that some of the men went home with ear necklaces."

"Hearsay," the Captain said gruffly. "And that was in a declared war." And then he wondered just how valid the distinction was. There were, he supposed, sadists on both sides. And then it came down to who committed the first cruelty and just how should you rank them? Was intentional torture for the few any the worse than the dispassionate act of dropping a bomb that produced quite the same, if not worse, results for the many?

"Just what would you do, Mister McCandless?"

The Lieutenant's face was flushed. "I'm not sure, sir. But I think I would look at it from a strategic viewpoint. There are two ships here, both instruments of war. If the aliens attack the one, and the other doesn't go to the rescue, then it would be obvious that we are a divided world. We would be a tempting ... prize."

"And if we went to the aid of the _Josef_, then you think we might beat the alien ship off?"

McCandless shrugged. "I don't know, sir. We might."

The Captain turned back to look at the now swelling sea. The air off the water was cool and brisk and the deck of his ship moved comfortably under his feet; a solid thing in a liquid world.

"It doesn't make a great deal of difference what we think, Lieutenant," the Captain said, a little of his good humor restored. "In the long run, we'll do whatever Washington says."

There was a sudden, flashing glow just over the horizon. McCandless blanched and the Captain clutched the rail, his knuckles turning white with the force of his grip. There was another flash and the OD popped out of the hatch of the wheelhouse like a cork out of a bottle. "Captain! the ..."

The Captain was already brushing past him, heading into the pilothouse for the television screen and the picture that the drone plane was transmitting.

The picture on the screen wavered and blurred with the shock of the action. From what he could see, the Captain knew that whatever action he took, if any, he would have to take it within a relative few minutes. The forward half of the superstructure of the _Josef_ was a smoking ruin, the metal a cherry red.

Half the planes on the flight deck were charred and being frantically pushed overboard by small tractors so the remainder of the planes could be airborne. A mile overhead, in the glazing blue sky, the few planes the _Josef_ had managed to launch buzzed futilely about the alien ship, discharging rockets that scintillated and flamed off the dull gray sides and, so far as the Captain could tell, were causing no damage at all.

"Message for you, sir."

He felt the clip board being pushed into his hand, then glanced down. It was difficult to read without his glasses but he could make it out.

Unusual ... do nothing rash ... your discretion ...

Some cautious pen pusher behind a desk, he thought chaotically. Somebody for whom miles had lent safety and detachment.

His discretion ...

It was his responsibility.

* * * * *

Commander Davis was at his elbow. "The _Josef_'s starting to list, Captain."

"I can see that!" he half snarled.

He wouldn't feel pity if the _Josef_ went down, he thought fiercely. It would be good riddance, one less carrier that they would have to worry about at some future date.

If there was some future date, a nagging thought intruded.

He throttled it. The _Josef_ stood for everything that he despised, a way of life that had made a mockery of everything he had been taught to believe in. The menace that had eaten at the world's vitals like a cancer, the menace whose existence had been enough to drive some men to hysteria and others to the brink of suicide. His own wife ...

Now a ship from Outside was attacking that power and what emotions should he feel? Elation? Well, why not? What other emotions should he feel? Certainly not sadness, not regret, not pity.

The _Josef_ would be sunk and maybe the aliens would be tempted to do more than just attack the _Josef_; they might attack the entire Combine as well. And if the Combine was beat, did it matter who did it?

Except, the thought crept back, there was no reason for him to believe that the aliens would differentiate between the _Josef_ and the _Oahu_, between the Combine and the United States.

"The planes!" McCandless said, incredulous. "Look at the planes!"

The Captain glanced down at the screen again. An orangish glow was suffusing the alien ship. A jet slipped in for a rocket shot. The glow pulsed, expanded, touched the jet, and the plane vanished into a rain of wreckage that sped towards the ocean below.

"God!" Davis breathed. "Did you see that?"

The Captain only half heard him. So they were aliens. What did that mean? Beings of different background, different beliefs, different physical structure? He had been one of the first into Berlin after the massacre was over and the Combine had laid the blame on their Berlin Commandant, though it was painfully obvious that he had only followed out instructions. And the shambles he had seen there couldn't have been done by human beings. Four thousand soldiers and close to a hundred thousand civilians killed. Would you call the people who had been responsible for that human beings or ... aliens? Which name fit best?

The Berlin war ...

A dozen different outbreaks, starting with Korea so long ago ...

And then you were supposed to admit that they were blood brothers after all, and that in the face of a mutual threat you should forget your differences and pool your resources against the common enemy.

"There goes another one!"

So in fifteen minutes the _Josef_ would go down. And from him it would bring only cheers, not tears.

But you didn't make decisions on a personal basis, he thought slowly. You had to look at it from the viewpoint of a thousand years. You had to develop a certain detachment, even though one man's lifetime was far too short a period to develop it in.

"Message for you, Captain."

It was a voice message that had been picked up in CIC. It was brief and to the point.

Attention Captain United States Vessel Oahu:

Help urgently requested. If aid not granted immediately, all is lost.

_Constantin Simenovich,
Captain, People's Warship_ Josef Dzugashvili.

He had a brief mental picture of a young man lying in the shambles of Berlin calling out the same words. And what had he received?

He buried the thought.

The detached viewpoint. Political systems evolved, he thought, they never remained the same. The French Revolution had spawned a thousand human monsters and the blood had run in the streets. But out of it all had come a democratic nation. And a thousand years from now, what would the Combine be? A turn of the wheel and perhaps it would be a peace-loving democracy while the United States would be the abattoir of human hopes. Who could tell? A thousand years from now the present bloodbaths and tortures and mass deaths would be history.

But if the aliens won you ran the chance of there being no history at all.

The wheelhouse was silent. The Captain could feel a dozen pairs of eyes watching him, waiting for his decision. Outside the ports, on the far horizon, there came a steady, golden pulsing.

He looked up at McCandless and Davis. McCandless was young, too inexperienced to realize that situations where today's enemies are tomorrow's friends are the order of the day and not the exception. You adjusted to it or you became bitter. Davis, the gutless bastard, had adjusted to it. He was probably already to make the switch, to go back to drinking toasts in vodka.

The detached viewpoint.

"Send up the jets," the Captain said slowly. "And send a message to the Captain of the _Josef_, telling him we'll render all the assistance that we can."

The wheelhouse broke into a flurry of activity and a moment later he could hear the sounds of the jets taking off the flight deck. He walked out on the bridge deck and leaned on the railing, staring at the horizon where the alien ship and the _Josef_ were fighting it out. And where planes from the _Oahu_ would shortly be helping the _Josef_.

But I still hate them, he thought. _I hate their goddamned souls!_

Transcriber's Note:

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